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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENNAI 000104

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SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PTER PHUM KDEM IN

SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: KERALA CATHOLIC LEADERS URGE FLOCK TO VOTE AGAINST COMMUNISTS

REF: 2008 Chennai 021

¶11. (SBU) Summary: During Sunday services Catholic priests across Kerala read a pastoral letter to their congregants that essentially told them to vote against the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) and its allies in the Left Democratic Front (LDF). The pastoral letter was just the latest in an ongoing feud between the Church and the state government since the CPM took charge in 2006. The CPM, which is already struggling with internal dissent and popular discontent in the run-up to elections, now faces the possibility of losing Catholic voters -- a key swing constituency in Kerala. End Summary

Kerala Christians an influential minority

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¶12. (SBU) Kerala has one of the highest proportions of Christians in India: nineteen percent of Kerala's thirty-two million people are Christian. Kerala has three major Christian communities, each with its roots in a different era of religious conversion. The oldest traces its origins to first century AD churches established by St. Thomas, the second to conversions by Portuguese missionaries during the sixteenth century, and the third to conversions during the British period. The oldest of the three groups, known as "Syrian Christians," wields much economic and political clout and runs a large number of educational institutions in the state. The later groups are largely made up of former members of the backward castes and continue to benefit from the state's affirmative action policies. Together, Christians constitute a major swing vote in Kerala, a state known for its tendency to alternate between Congress and Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led coalitions.

We interrupt this service for an important political message

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¶13. (SBU) On March 29, Catholic priests across Kerala read a pastoral letter issued by the Kerala Catholic Bishops Conference (KCBC) during Sunday services. Signed by the top leaders of Kerala's three major divisions of the Catholic Church (the Latin, the Syrian, and Syro-Malankara rites) the letter was described as "an appeal to the electorate" and urged Catholics to vote against those "who thrust atheistic beliefs and violent confrontationist politics," an indirect but clear reference to Kerala's ruling CPM and the LDF. The letter also reminded the laity of the ongoing conflict between the Catholic Church and the CPM-led state government over control of religious educational institutions by mentioning the "continuing violations of minority rights in the Education sector" (reftel).

¶4. (SBU) Catholic schools have been a flashpoint between the Church and the CPM-led LDF since it took power in 2006. The government tried to bring private professional colleges under state control, evoking sharp criticism from the Church. The CPM's student wing, in turn, staged violent protests at some of the colleges. The conflict subsided after a court struck down the contentious provisions of the government's legislation but flared up again when reports surfaced that the government planned to assert the right to appoint teachers in "aided schools" -- private schools (including many church schools) where the government pays teacher salaries. Government officials justified the move on the grounds that appointments are the source of considerable corruption with school management requiring prospective teachers to pay bribes to secure positions. The private schools responded by saying the government move was simply a punitive measure meant to curtail churches' long held privilege to appoint teachers. Tempers flared with a Syrian Christian Cardinal reportedly saying the Church would not allow the "drunkards and atheists" appointed by the leftist government to teach in its schools. The State Education Minister retorted by noting that even liquor shops are subject to more regulation than religious schools.

¶5. (SBU) The reading of the pastoral letter just weeks before the parliamentary elections caused concern in the Kerala CPM, prompting the Finance Minister to write a newspaper opinion piece in response. He wrote that many priests went beyond just reading the pastoral letter and instead specifically urged parishioners to vote only for candidates from the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF). In an effort to mitigate the impact of the letter, the CPM Minister argued that the pastoral letter does not apply to his party because,

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although its leaders are atheists, they do not thrust their beliefs on others as the pastoral letter alleged.

¶6. (SBU) As feared by the CPM, Catholics in some parts of Kerala have begun to campaign vigorously against the LDF. For example, 700 parishioners from across 14 parishes in north Kerala organized a "study class" on the need to "vote responsibly." A priest inaugurating the meeting said that "if the shepherds are struck, the sheep would be scattered," reminding the gathered parishioners of the CPM's attempts to denigrate church leaders. In some heavily Catholic localities, squads of Catholic volunteers are reportedly campaigning against Leftist candidates.

Pastoral letter takes on BJP too

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¶7. (SBU) The pastoral letter also referred to the 2002 Gujarat riots and the 2008 attacks on Christians in Orissa, urging Catholics to vote for those parties which treat all religions impartially, protect religious minorities, and ensure fundamental human rights for all. In a reference to the attacks in Orissa, the letter stressed the need to elect politicians who protect the rights of women, tribals and Dalit Christians. Although the letter did not specifically name the BJP, the references to BJP-led Gujarat and Orissa, where a former BJP ally commands power, were easily understood in Kerala to be a criticism of the Hindu nationalist party.

Comment: more bad news for Kerala CPM

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¶8. (SBU) Comment: Although the Kerala church has regularly offered gentle guidance to its flock during election seasons, the pastoral letter was unusually direct in exhorting Catholics to oppose those "who thrust atheistic beliefs and violent confrontationist politics." Every Catholic listening on March 29 knew exactly what it meant: that they should vote against the CPM and its LDF allies. The decision of the Catholic Church to involve itself so directly in the election is consistent with Indian political tradition where leaders of religious groups (and caste groups) have had few qualms about aligning themselves with one party or another. Although most Kerala Catholics will still vote on the basis of their own political convictions (and many will thus vote for LDF candidates), the CPM

obviously worries that some of these key swing votes will be swayed by the clerics' argument that good Catholics should vote against the leftists. The fight with the Catholic Church is yet another problem that the struggling CPM does not need just weeks before Kerala goes to the polls. End Comment.

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